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Muskie, Ned oral history interview

Don Nicoll

Interview with Ned Muskie by Don Nicoll

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee
Muskie, Ned

Interviewer
Nicoll, Don

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Place
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Biographical Note

Edmund S. "Ned" Muskie, Jr. was born on July 4, 1961. He is the youngest of five children born to Edmund S. and Jane (Gray) Muskie. Ned is an avid golfer and often fished with his father. He attended Duke University, and is currently an international banker.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: 1980-1981 Secretary of State years; Iranian hostage crisis; former secretaries of state program; Muskie School for Public Service; Muskie Foundation, Muskie Fellowship program; Ed and Ned's trips through Maine; golf; cribbage; and Muskie's legacy and Maine.

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Transcript

Don Nicoll: It is Monday the 1st of May in the year 2000, we're at 750 Fifteenth Street NW in the offices of First Union Bank, Washington, D.C., and we're talking for the second time with Ned Muskie. Ned, you are very actively engaged in a number of activities related to your dad's legacy, notably the Muskie School, and yet you are the youngest of his children and the one probably least exposed to his political career when he was in the midst of it. What is it that has moved you particularly to focus on his career and focus on preserving that legacy?

Ned Muskie: Well, a number of things come to mind. One is, Don, you might remember after dad died, I guess it's been four years now, I even talked to you I think it was when you were trying to get me to join the board at the Muskie School, I told you how interested I was in preserving Dad's legacy in whatever shape that took. And back then I didn't know what it would be, I was just kind of scared that Dad would fall off the map of, you know, everybody's consciousness, and I didn't want that to happen. I didn't want people to forget somebody who I thought was so special. And I remember saying to you, you know, that I had always wished Dad would write a book. And in fact I had always kind of wished that maybe Steve and me would present the idea to Dad and work on it, work on the book with him, an autobiography or biography.

So even before Dad died I was interested in his legacy, not so much from a, almost more from a selfish perspective. I wanted to get to know Dad better. Back in '72 when Dad ran for president I was only eleven and, you know, I remember those times more in terms of fun and the fun that an eleven-year-old can have with Secret Service men and with conventions and travel and meeting people and being the center of attention and all of that. So when Dad died, I, you know,

it was around the time when I guess, other people died like Ronald Reagan, and he was having an airport and a world trade center here in Washington named after him, and you I wanted something for Dad. And I didn't know what it would be.

And I said the other day to someone that I really thought that Dad's legacy has become the Muskie School for Public Service, that it's really become a lot about students, educating students on not just public service but . . . . You might be aware of the Muskie Fellowship program, which was created back in 1990 after the fall of Communism. The Congress approved an allocation of money for the Muskie Fellowship program which was focused on bringing very bright and talented students from the former Soviet Union. All, I guess, ten countries now, to the U.S. for two years. And this program, much like the Fulbright program and the Hubert Humphrey program, it's been very successful. In fact, one of the things, you probably didn't know this, but I'm now on the board of the American Councils for International Education which oversees the administration of the Muskie Fellowship program. And it also has been very successful. This year they just approved or admitted I want to say just over three hundred students into this year's program out of sixteen hundred applications. So it's, in the former Soviet Union, it's a very popular program. I've had heads of state, from many of the countries, say to me what a success it's been, that so many of their current leaders in those NIS countries are, you know, chairmen of banks or heads of government ministries, or aspiring successful leaders in their country. So in addition to the Muskie School, the Muskie Fellowship program and the Muskie Foundation, which I'm on the board of, it's really been a good way for me to learn more about Dad and that's what's really inspired me. And, I, yeah, it occupies a lot of my interest these days.

DN: It is of interest I think that you are an international banker and you're spending a fair amount of time in your civic contributions, working on international programs. Your dad was Secretary of State when you were nineteen, if my arithmetic is right.

NM: I think that's right.

DN: How did you feel about it when he became Secretary of State?

NM: Well, first of all I knew Dad would enjoy that job. I remember I was in my last year of high school when that took place. I remember Mom telling me that the president had approached Dad after Cy Vance resigned. And I remember thinking, 'gosh, this is right up Dad's alley, it's a great way for him to finish his career', because he had always enjoyed traveling overseas and often showing up pictures at home of his travels to China or Vietnam or wherever. And I think he was very much an internationalist at heart. So I thought that was great. It was sad that it only lasted eight months because I know that he would have enjoyed having a full four years as secretary of state and he would have been terrific at it. And it was too bad that at the time it was dominated by the Iranian hostage crisis, but on the other hand that was a big test for him as secretary.

DN: Did he ever talk to you about that period and the negotiations, what they were like?

NM: Well, I remember a really amusing story, that I had a very good friend of mine from

London, he and his wife, Mark Simpson and Janet Simpson, came and stayed with us up in Maine, and it was just Julia and me and Mom and Dad and Mark and Janet Simpson. And I remember Mark, who is a barrister in London and a very keen political scientist, wanted to impress Dad. And we were having a lobster dinner and he said to Dad, you know, "Secretary Muskie, the U.S. policy on not negotiating for hostages is just brilliant, it seems to work and send the right message to, you know, terrorists around the world." And, you know, he was trying to flatter Dad. And Dad, in his usual way, responded contrary to what Mark expected. And I remember him bellowing out at, "God dammit, young man, if you think that we don't negotiate for hostages you've got another thing coming," and pounding his fist on the dining room table. And it led to a long discussion about what that process truly entailed, that the public policy of not negotiating for hostages is not entirely true.

But I, Dad was pretty good about talking about the issues that he was dealing on at the time, especially when he was senator working on certain bills that he cared about or that he had a big vote coming up, or one that he had just won that day. He liked to talk about it. I wish, frankly, that I had been older and more mature where I would have shown more interest and asked more questions. And I know that he would have liked that. And again, that comes back to my interest in his legacy. I feel like I missed a great opportunity to get to know Dad with me as an adult, and that just never really happened. And then when Dad was, later in life, you know, he wasn't as chatty as he once was and not quite as engaged but he would still love to have conversations. In fact, he and I used to have maybe a monthly lunch downtown where he and I would go over to the Mayflower Hotel and have lunch and, or not, the Madison Hotel, and just . . . . He was more interested in how my career was going and things like that, but inevitably we would talk about whatever the topic of the day was.

DN: As you moved in the banking world, particularly with your international banking, your professional interest and his were really quite close because a lot of his practice was international practice.

NM: Well in fact I went with him and Carole Parmelee on their trip to India; that was one of my first trips. Dad was in his mid-seventies and somewhat frail at the time, and so he asked me if I wanted to go with him and I was delighted to. And subsequent to that I traveled to many countries which he had been to and spent some time. Like, I loved talking to him about those countries, like I went to Vietnam, and he dug out photos and we talked about Vietnam and the war. And, I didn't go to Cambodia but we talked about his experiences there working on behalf of, I guess it was President Bush. And maybe Reagan initiated that, where he was basically the president's, I'm not sure what you'd call it but maybe counsel, on the changes that were taking place in Cambodia.

Likewise, I went to Panama where Dad had sailed through the Panama Canal, and I've since gone back three times and doing a lot of business in Panama. So it was, and I went to Namibia of all places, where Dad oversaw their first free elections in 1990, and I remember talking to him about that. And they, of course people all over the world, when they hear my name they usually perk up. And they at least know the name and ask questions about Dad, or many of them had met him when they were working with the embassy here in Washington and maybe accompanied him to a trip to China or Vietnam or India, or someplace like that.

DN: Dropping back to that conversation in Kennebunk with your friend Mark, was it a revelation to you to hear about the image of no negotiation and the fact of real negotiations?

NM: No, in fact when, the minute he slammed his fist on the dining room table and said, "Do you think that we don't negotiate?" It suddenly occurred to me, 'of course that's right'. I mean, how else do you reach a resolution to a problem? I mean, there has to be give and take and I imagine on any issue, even, you know, you can think of when hijackers release hostages there has to be some give and take. But Dad had, Dad was a great teacher as you know, and he almost always put things in a perspective where you kind of think, 'ah-ha, of course, that's right'. And he loved to share those insights with you. He wasn't predictable at all. You could, in fact, count on an unpredictable answer. And I said that to Mark, I said, afterwards I said, you know, "If there's one thing you should know about Dad, he likes to play devil's advocate and he likes to always show you that there's more than one side to a story."

DN: As he talked about the Soviet Union and the former Soviet Union, and as you heard about the Muskie Fellowship program, did he talk much about his own family's connection with that part of the world?

NM: Well, in fact, I had to give a speech recently to this year's program and I dug back and read some of his, the speeches that he gave to the students in past years, in the early nineties, and in every one of them he did relate his own family background. Even the name Muskie, he talked about how that was derived from a good Slavic name, Marciszewski. But he talked about the emerging economy in Poland and talked about the importance of the countries of the NIS becoming capitalistic societies. He loved being part of that program and talking to these students. Every year he gave the keynote address to the students, which is something that they lack now. They, in fact Madeleine Albright's going to speak to them this year, but they hadn't had someone other than the program director talk to them in the past two or three years, which is a shame because I know they enjoyed hearing Dad speak and hearing the relevance of and importance of a program like theirs.

DN: When you went to India on the trip with your dad and Carole Parmelee, what did you do?

NM: Well it was an energy conference that Chabourne & Parke was the, I think they were one of two sponsors. I think AEG, the energy company was one of the others. It was a formal conference and Dad spoke at it and listened to other speakers and met, we met with government officials in India, we met with the president and the vice president. As I recall, it was probably a, it was back in '93, we probably spent three days in Delhi and we toured the city, and we went up to Agra to see the Taj Mahal. It was interesting, it was like any conference, somewhat boring but, for me as a banker, but I did some business on my own. But it was fun to be with Dad, it wasn't that much different than being with him at a function in the U.S., although he liked to travel and he liked to talk to people of different cultures.

DN: Was he still as irritable about disruptions of travel as he was when younger?

NM: Well, it's funny you would say that, I was about to, oh, he was terrible. He was, I think, a

lot more ornery about the travel. I remember him being very short with someone at a x-ray machine. Carole and I were laughing about that recently. Yeah, he, that part of the trip, once we got him settled in the plane and settled in the airport and in the hotels he was fine, but it was a good thing we were there, put it that way.

DN: I always observed that it didn't matter whether it was an engine problem, a human error or the weather, it was a personal insult that it discombobulated his travel.

NM: That's right. And the same was true whenever he'd do his daily commute to work in D.C. and back home, he was one of those commuters who was always, you know, saying, "God dammit," pounding his steering wheel. Not a relaxed traveler.

DN: Did you get any insights during those years, roughly 1980 on into the nineties, about his attitudes toward some of the key people with whom he worked, President Carter, some of the other Cabinet officials, members of the Senate? Did he talk much about those individuals?

NM: See, this is where I wish I had been, I don't think I probed enough. We did talk about President Carter quite a bit, and he had great esteem for him and really thought he was a brilliant man with a good heart and an effective leader. He was very loyal to people like him who were senior Democrats mostly. He was not, you know, when you were in Dad's good books he had nothing but good to say about that person and would defend that person.

I, you know again, I feel fairly useless on this front. Apart from when we would meet certain people and I would ask him what he thought of people, like the other day I was walking past the White House and I remembered a time when Dad and I shook hands with Bill Bradley at the White House gates. And I remember him saying to me that he would be a successful senator one day. This was many years ago. But going back to the eighties and, I think I talked to him more in the seventies because, about different leaders of the time, because they tended to, Mom and Dad would have them over for dinner. But in the eighties after he left office, that happened more infrequently. I mean, oftentimes I'd watch the evening news with him and he'd, you know, react to certain issues and, but I can't think of any particular, I mean if you named someone I could probably tell you.

DN: Well, for example during the seventies, did he have an ongoing relationship with or pretty much avoid somebody like Gene McCarthy, who had campaigned for a while against him and Hubert Humphrey in 1968?

NM: Well it's interesting, maybe my perspective's different than yours or anyone else who was older than I at the time. I always remember Gene McCarthy very fondly as a friend of the family's. And it wasn't because of Mom and Dad's good relationship with his wife, it, I really do think that Dad and he were good friends, or at least very friendly. I always thought of him as a friend of the family's, and I don't think I would have thought that if Dad didn't think that as well. In fact, I see him, every six months I run into him at restaurants or something, and he's always extremely nice and remembers me. And also Dad would see him at the Redskins game. He was also a guest of Jack (*name*), so we saw them at least eight times a year at the Redskins game.

DN: So that sometimes difficult campaign did not ruin a relationship? Because they had been very good friends in the Senate.

NM: Right, no, I don't think so. Not, but I'm probably the wrong person to ask that.

DN: No, you're the right person to ask because he wouldn't be putting on airs or -

NM: Right, right, Dad didn't put on airs, that's right.

DN: How about some of the other folks from that era? Do you remember his encounters or interrelationships?

NM: I always paid attention to the Maine contingent, people in the Maine delegation, like Bill Hathaway he always seemed to be very friendly with. Again, because Bill Hathaway was a golfer, you know, the three of us would play golf so I always assumed that Dad had a good relationship with him. And I had no idea of whether Dad thought anything but good things about him. Or Ken Curtis, he always thought extremely highly of him and we saw him frequently. Bill Cohen, he, I always thought, said a lot of positive things which I always remembered because Dad didn't often have positive things to say about Republicans. I don't know, who else? There were a lot of senators that I remember here in Washington, like Senator Byrd he had great respect for and I think they had a great friendship. And Ambassador Mansfield, I think he often described him as his closest friend in the Senate. I don't know if you thought that or knew that?

DN: Actually, I don't think, I never thought of Senator Mansfield being a close personal friend in the way that, certainly in the sixties, one felt about him and Gene McCarthy, but always thought of Senator Mansfield as being someone that, for whom he had enormous respect and affection. And so that it was professional, a friendship based on professional experience and relationships, not a professional relationship and not one based on social activities.

NM: No, I think that's probably right.

DN: Whereas Gene McCarthy was a combination of social friendship and some professional linkages, although they didn't tend to work in the same legislative areas; there wasn't then a lot of overlap.

NM: Well see, you would know that better than I.

DN: But the insights that you have about attitudes toward individuals, it is important because you saw him in the non-public moments and -

NM: Well the names I've just mentioned are ones that I would just hear in a positive light around the house, and there were many more. I just, you know, these are names that you don't read about any more so it's hard to conjure them up.

DN: In the late eighties and into the nineties as you talked with your Dad and you saw him

regularly for lunches, what sorts of issues seemed to be on his mind more than others?

NM: Good question. Again, it's kind of trying to replay your memory back to the time. Well, certainly during the Republican administrations of Reagan and Bush, which ended at the end of, well I guess in '92, he was very partisan I thought and very, didn't have a lot of good things to say about the Bush administration and the economy at the time, although the economy was starting to get better in the early nineties. Gosh, I, the things that come to mind are, he spent a lot of time in Cambodia, he spent time going back a number of years on the Tower Commission, working on that. I'll be honest, I can't think of what some of the big issues were. Are there any you can think of in particular?

DN: No, it appears that his focus was largely on foreign policy issues when you speak of Cambodia, Southeast Asia, the Tower Commission.

NM: Well he, ever since he left the State Department he stayed involved with the former secretaries of state program which happened annually, and he certainly spoke a number of times on, to different international groups. But he also spoke to, you know, the American Bar Association, he spoke to groups in Maine. But I can't think of other issues.

DN: Did he exhibit any great concerns about the society, the American society during that period?

NM: I'd be kind of putting words into his mouth if I said so. You know, I often, like I said before, would watch the evening news with him. And he would just, you know, certainly express pessimism over whatever was going on at the time, whether it was the breakup of the family as a unit in America, things like that, or AIDS and abortion, big issues like those certainly dismayed him.

DN: But he was reacting to the news as he observed it through the news media rather than feeling compelled to talk about it outside of that environment.

NM: Right. That's not the sort of thing, unfortunately, that he and I would just sort of talk about as a topic of conversation if I went over there in the weekend. And, we just wouldn't sit down and talk about issues like that. I think he was, during those years, focused a lot on our family, focused on, you know, each child's challenges at the time. As you know, he was a terrific and caring father which is probably best exemplified by his caring for Martha and the problems that she's had ever since the, I guess, early eighties. And it was different with each child. I mean he would, you know, spend a lot of time and think a lot about the family and its challenges.

DN: When he played golf with you, what sorts of things did he talk about?

NM: Well, we often talked about sports. He knew I loved sports, but he also liked sports I think as much as I did in terms of just being a spectator, whether it was pro football or basketball or baseball. He and I, in fact a lot of the teams I support were ones that Dad did. And I'm sure I picked those up when I was a child, you know, loving the Boston Red Sox just because Dad did,

or the Redskins or the . . . . So he did, he liked to talk about sports and, oh, I don't know. On the golf course you tend to talk about a million and one different topics, but he was very focused on his golf. He was very frustrated by his golf always. I don't think there is a time I knew Dad as a golfer when he wasn't frustrated with it as a game. He took it I think even more seriously than I did, I certainly now think that. I don't, it's been a long time since it was a game of relaxation for him.

DN: Do you think it ever was?

NM: Yeah, I think in his own sort of way. I think he was just very, I used the word focus, but what's another word, serious about his game, serious about wanting to improve it and frustrated by it. It's a good thing that being, in his public life I don't think things checked out, I think he could fix things that were wrong in his public life, I doubt he had as much frustration as he did with golf.

DN: I gather it's hard when you start late as he did.

NM: That's right, but he loved, Dad loved the camaraderie, that's why he played golf, that's why he hunted occasionally. Dad, one of my biggest frustrations with Dad was that he loved his friends, but he wasn't very good at getting them together. He was hardly ever the instigator for doing something, which was too bad because he loved being with his friends, you know. Whether it was John Charles Daley playing golf, or Dick Hildreth playing golf, or with certain friends hunting, Rollison Baxter, or just being together with people like yourself, or Charlie Landers or Aunt Betty and John Levinson; he loved his friends.

DN: Did he teach you to play cribbage?

NM: I'm the only child who never learned cribbage.

DN: Is that because you weren't interested or because by then he was less interested?

NM: I think he was always interested. In fact, Martha learned I think because Martha asked him to teach her. And Melinda knows how and, I don't know if Ellen does but I think Steve knows how. I have to be honest, I never had any interest. Even to this day, I really have no interest.

DN: Cards are not your cup of tea as it were.

NM: An occasional game of poker is about it. No, he loved his cribbage tournament that he was involved with it ever since he was in the war. And it was sad, you know, I'm not sure how many people they started out with but it was sad when it got down to two people. I think Larry Butler and Dad were the last two. And they, almost every year they had their annual event and they had a trophy of some sort or a silver bowl, and he loved that.

DN: When you think about his legacy, do you think mostly about his legacy in the foreign policy field or sort of across the board in his civic service?

NM: No, in fact I really don't think of it in terms of foreign policy. I think of it as the state of Maine. I think that the Muskie School for Public Service is a fantastic tribute to Dad that I feel certain will be around for a long time educating future leaders of Maine. I still hope that part of Dad's legacy will be some sort of, whether it's the Maine airport or something big in Maine, because I think Dad's contributions to the state of Maine deserve some big public thing with his name on it.

Although I changed, back when Dad died I kind of thought that should be the first type of thing, but I'm pleased that the Muskie school is the most prominent thing with Dad's name on it because it's more, it has a life to it, or it has many lives involved with it, and it's extremely meaningful. And I'm very, it's meaningful to me being involved with it.

But I do, I still hope that part of Dad's legacy is some sort of building or airport named after him. And sadly, I think as the years go on that grows probably less likely, and I don't think there's been any tide that, moving toward something like that happening. But I definitely think Dad's legacy is primarily Maine focused. And I think the Muskie Fellowship program is a good legacy to Dad on the international front. But that program is in jeopardy of losing its name right now because of budget constraints within the State Department. So you have to ask yourself what are the long lasting things that will contribute to Dad's legacy. That's kind of why I would like some sort of public building or airport named after him just perpetually be out there as the Edmund S. Muskie whatever, airport, so that people think of his name on a regular basis. And, more importantly, people of different generations thinking of his name and contributions to the state.

DN: Apparently, his ties to Maine were emphasized in his relationship with you and the family. That is, he made it clear that Maine was important.

NM: Absolutely. It's a good point and it's, you know, it's always seemed obvious to me. I mean, Maine's always been our home. Even though I love Washington and all of us have spent a lot of time down here, Maine's our home. Maine is the place where I've got a lot of passion, and Dad certainly did, and he was happiest when he was in Maine. He loved his homes up in Maine. He loved, gosh, he knew the state of Maine better than anyone I've ever met. And you know that; you've traveled the state with him from one end to the other. He loved taking, in my case, taking me fishing up in Meguntic and part of the experience of going up there was just driving through a lot of towns and places where he had spent time. You know, driving through Lewiston on the way up, driving through Freeport, driving through, oh gosh, Farmington, through parts of Maine that I don't often go to. And he would always, the entire trip up there which took many hours, he would have lots of stories about campaigning or about whatever. And we would always stop in Rumford and see his old home and see relatives when we had a chance, and before they passed away.

DN: You remember any of those stories?

NM: You know, that's one gift that I just don't have that Dad had was the memory of stories and anecdotes.

DN: But you remember the fact of being driven through and told about them?

NM: Yeah, I just don't remember names and places and, because I don't know Maine as well as some of my other siblings, and certainly as well as my parents. There were just so many great stories, either of the family growing up in the Blaine House or he would often try to tell us stories about our grandparents since, in my case I never met either grandfather, and liked to talk about our Polish heritage. In fact, in September I'm going back to our home town in, I think it's pronounced "Bialystok" in eastern Poland. I mean he had a story for every occasion, as you know.

DN: Are you going to eastern Poland on business or as part of a special occasion?

NM: Well, I'm going to Prague for the World Bank meetings in September and I have business in Warsaw so, which I've been to once before, and I thought I would take the opportunity to take the train out to eastern Poland and see if there are any Muskie ancestors I can meet. I think Dad would be pleased that I would do that. I hope it's fruitful. I need to do some homework, hopefully with Chris Beam at the archives, to see if I can get some clues on where to go and who to talk to.

DN: Well this has been very helpful, it provides some different dimensions on -

NM: I think you were about to say Steve, which, I don't know if you were, but my father used to always do that, he'd often call me Steve.

DN: Is that right?

NM: And he always thought I minded when he did that, but I never did.

DN: The oldest and the youngest. You had a family bracketed by males. Well thank you very much and if you have any additional stories we'll add them in the future. Thank you, Ned.

End of Interview